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VIRTUAL PEER MENTORING: CAN WE CREATE A COMMUNITY OF PEER -SUPPORTED LEARNERS?

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an investigation into peer mentoring at Northumbria University, the results of which indicated that students would welcome a peer mentoring scheme but that, given the piecemeal nature of contact between mentor and mentee, a virtual peer mentoring scheme was more appropriate than one conducted face-to-face. A concurrent project at Northumbria University was engaged in investigating student use of the University's virtual learning environment, the eLearning Portal (eLP). Results of this project gave some indication of what might inhibit the introduction of a virtual peer mentoring scheme based around the eLP.

KEYWORDS

Virtual Peer Mentoring; Virtual Learning Environments;

Peer mentoring is a preferred means employed by many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to assist in the integration of first year students into their discipline at university and has been found to be an effective way to improve the first year experience of students.(Watson, 2000; Farrell et al., 2004). Peer mentoring runs very successfully at a number of HEIs in the United Kingdom, for example Bournemouth and the University of Manchester (Capstick & Fleming 2001; Draper 2004). Potential benefits claimed for peer mentoring include increased rates of student retention and achievement for a relatively low cost (Boud, et al 2001; Hodges. & White. 2001).

American research suggests that peer mentoring users gain higher mean grades than non-users (Congos & Schoeps, 1993 among others). Evidence from Europe and South Africa is less strong but suggests that those students who join a peer mentoring scheme do better than those students who do not (McCarthy et al., 1997).

A number of HEIs have found that peer mentoring programmes are of benefit not only to new students (mentees), but also to the students who mentor them since it helps them develop confidence in their discipline, communication, team working and problem solving, i.e. skills or abilities sought by employers (Bond, 1999; Shrestha, 1999).

At Northumbria a peer mentoring pilot scheme was run in Newcastle Business School but this enjoyed limited success. Therefore a research project across the University was conducted in order to answer the following research questions:

- What needs do students at Northumbria have that might be addressed by a peer mentoring scheme?
- What type of peer mentoring system would students like?

Key statements derived from articles on peer mentoring were incorporated into a short questionnaire which was emailed out to students via the University distribution list. In addition, a web-based version of the questionnaire was loaded onto the Students' Union website. Students were asked to volunteer for a follow-up interview.

A total of 311 questionnaires were returned from 232 females and 77 male students (two students did not indicate their gender). 50% of the students were from the North East of England, 32% were from other parts of the UK; 13% were international students from outside the EU; and 4% were from EU member countries. 42.4% of the respondents were first year students. Ten students volunteered to be interviewed over the phone.

- Responses were then categorised under the following headings (Number in brackets indicates the number of responses that matched each category) Academic issues (54) Time/timetabling issues (24)
- Financial issues (58)
- IT issues (22)

- Accommodation issues(14)
- Location issues(34)
- Social issues(79)

The second part of the questionnaire sought to gain insight about the type of peer mentoring system that students would like, in terms of attributes of the mentor, formality of the system, frequency of meeting and mode of meeting.

Students expressed a willingness to have (in order of preference):

- One or two mentors whom they could contact about anything
- A mentor on the same programme as themselves
- Virtual contact rather than face to face
- Timetabled mentoring sessions

Although Northumbria's pilot peer mentoring model had enjoyed limited success, it was clear from the interviews and questionnaire responses that students (over 70% of the sample) did feel there was a need for peer mentoring programmes to be run at Northumbria University. A close examination of student responses to a number of differing dimensions of a peer mentoring model indicated that the peer mentors were likely to be accessed on a piecemeal basis and that this could be managed mostly through virtual contact.

One suggestion had been that virtual peer mentoring could be achieved via the university's VLE, the eLearning Portal (eLP). The University as a whole is investing a considerable amount of time in listening to the opinions of student users of the eLP. Concurrent studies being conducted at Northumbria University included the establishment an eLP Student Feedback Group which provided an informal environment for ideas regarding the eLP to be discussed. Another study, designed to ascertain how students were using the eLP, employed questionnaire and interview methods similar to those employed in the Peer Mentoring study but, in addition, used student diaries to record how the eLP was being used.

Diary data provided insight into the students' views of the contribution that the eLP made to their learning, both positive and negative. The quotations used are representative of students' opinions.

Positive aspects are illustrated by the following student comments:

- *I use eLP to allow me to interact with other students and lecturers via the discussion boards and it often helps when I am struggling with work, especially when I know others are also finding it difficult.* (2nd year female UK student)
- *The eLP is an aid to learning, a teaching method for tutors and students..., they can communicate with each other clearly and talk with each other easily, especially for these shy people who don't like to ask questions in class..* (1st year female international student)
- *The eLP serves as electronic notice board and a link between different stakeholders (teachers, students, and university administration).* (postgraduate female international student)

These comments indicate that the eLP is already being used to some extent as a communication tool and that this should facilitate its further development as a conduit for virtual peer mentoring.

However, the diarists also recorded negative comments:

- *I found that the eLP was not very exciting to the typical student that feels they have better things to do with their time..*(1st year female UK student)
- *Students use the eLP just because their tutors ask them to do it. They do not use it on their own initiative...*(postgraduate female international student)

A 2003 study of the use of the eLP at Northumbria (Gannon-Leary & McDowell) found that students were not using the discussion areas of the VLE. Staff felt that, while students had the potential to learn a lot from each other, they needed to be academically mature to benefit from the interactivity. This lack of use was, in part, put down to inertia on the part of the students but it was also credited to their feelings that any contribution they made had to be 'first class' before it was committed to the VLE.

This reported inertia needs to be addressed if the eLP is to be used as a platform for virtual peer mentoring. Another issue involves preparedness to use the eLP. Molesworth (2004) comments that students frequently expressed the need for guidance in study skills when making the transition from school to university, looking to academics to draw their attention to, and use an institutional VLE effectively. Only 19.4% (79/407) of the respondents in the eLP study agreed that they had used a system similar to the eLP at their school or college prior to coming to Northumbria so they were prepared to use a VLE. A number of students identified problems in their preparation.

- *I didn't receive much support at the beginning of my course on how to use the eLP so found that I have taught myself* (1st year female UK student)
- *I think guidance is important especially for first year entry students. As an international student, I feel we need more...* (4th year male international student)
- *When first introduced to it we were not really shown how to use it, but mainly told that it was there and how to log on to it.* (2nd year male UK student)
- *When I first started I wish I had a run through of how to actually use it ...because all I got was 'this is eLP get on with it' I was not shown how to use it or what it was for.* (3rd year female UK student)

While the research indicates that the eLP is used extensively by the students to access learning materials, only 17% (69/407) of students in the 2006 Northumbria survey agreed that they contacted other students using the eLP even if they were not instructed to do so by their lecturers and only 29.75% (121/407) agreed that they contacted other students via the eLP if their lecturers told them to do so.

The above described factors, namely student inertia, lack of preparedness to use the eLP and under-use of the communications facilities of the eLP may militate against its use for virtual peer mentoring. Peer mentoring is particularly beneficial to the first year student but this may be the very student who is unfamiliar with the ways in which the eLP can be used. More guidance in such use needs to be given not only from the technological viewpoint but also from the pedagogical, in that students need to be persuaded that they do not have to post the 'perfect' question or response in a discussion board. The issue of student inertia may be partially overcome if confidence in the ability to use the eLP is increased. It would seem from the research into peer mentoring that students are motivated to use a peer mentoring system but the conditions in which it operates need further examination.

The authors are exploring the potential of virtual peer mentoring within their institution with a small group of students with the hope that this may be rolled out to the wider student community. The structure of the test eLP virtual peer mentoring site allows for the students acting as mentors to take full responsibility for the editing and updating of the site, a concept which is unique across the institution. One to one training sessions with the students who demonstrated interest in undertaking this site management role, clearly showed that there is genuine appeal in the virtual nature of the peer mentoring project, and provides the basis for future development. Hence the first seeds have been sown, for example, students involved in the test site have indicated they would still like to be involved next year. The success of schemes such as the virtual peer mentoring is vital in the sense it will encourage students to use the eLP not just for academic reasons but also for personal development. From our perspective if we achieve that during their first year at university, the principle should carry forward into the remainder of their university lives.

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